

Law and Citizenship in the Roman Republic

By USHistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.03.17

Word Count **953**

Level **1070L**



"Cicero Accuses Catiline," painted by Cesare Maccari in 1888, shows Cicero speaking in the Roman Senate and Catiline in the corner. Cicero was one of Rome's two consuls, the highest elected political offices of the Roman Republic. He said he had uncovered a plot by Catiline to assassinate him and overthrow the Roman Republic.

The Romans established a form of government — a republic — that was copied by countries for centuries. The government of the United States is based partly on Rome's model.

It began when the Romans overthrew their Etruscan conquerors in 509 B.C., more than 2,500 years ago. Centered north of Rome, Italy, the Etruscans had ruled over the Romans for hundreds of years.

Once free, the Romans established a republic, a government in which citizens elected representatives to rule. A republic is different from a democracy, in which every citizen is expected to play a role in governing the state.

All males over age 15 who were descended from the original tribes of Rome became citizens. Citizens of Rome distinguished themselves from slaves and other noncitizens by wearing a toga, and most wore a white toga.

Citizenship varied greatly. Some people were full citizens while others were limited on whether they could vote, hold government jobs or do business. In the late republic, male slaves who were granted their freedom could become full citizens. Around 90 B.C., non-Roman allies of the republic gained the rights of citizenship.

The wealthy class of aristocrats dominated the early republic. In Roman society, the aristocrats were known as patricians. The highest positions in the government were held by two consuls, or leaders, who ruled the republic. A senate composed of patricians elected these consuls.

Lower-class citizens, or plebeians, had almost no say in the government. Both men and women were citizens in the republic, but only men could vote.

Tradition said that patricians and plebeians should be strictly separated, and marriage between the two classes was prohibited. Over time, the plebeians elected their own representatives, called tribunes, who gained the power to reject measures passed by the senate.

Gradually, the plebeians gained even more power and eventually could hold the position of consul. Despite these changes, the patricians were still able to use their wealth to buy control over elected leaders.

The Roman Senate

The Roman Senate was created as a 100-member advisory group for Roman kings. When the kings were expelled from Rome and the republic was formed, the Senate became the most powerful governing body. Instead of advising the head of state, it elected the chief executives, called consuls.

Senators were, for centuries, only from the patrician class. By the 3rd century B.C., Rome had conquered vast territories, and the powerful senators sent armies, negotiated terms of treaties and had control over the money matters of the republic.

Occasionally, an emergency situation such as a war arose that required the leadership of one individual. In these cases, the Senate and the consuls could appoint a dictator to rule just until the crisis was resolved. The position of dictator was not democratic. A dictator had all the power and had control over the military.

The best example of an ideal dictator was a Roman named Cincinnatus. During a military emergency, the Senate called Cincinnatus from his farm to serve as dictator and to lead the army. When Cincinnatus stepped down from the dictatorship and returned to his farm only 15 days after he defeated Rome's enemies, the republican leaders resumed control.

Senatorial control was eventually challenged by Sulla, a dictator who used brutal tactics, around 82 B.C. Sulla had hundreds of senators murdered, increased the Senate's membership to 600 and made many non-patricians senators.

Later, the Roman leader Julius Caesar raised the number to 900 senators, although it was reduced after his assassination. After the start of the Roman Empire in 27 B.C., the Senate became weakened under strong emperors who used force on this ruling body.

The Twelve Tables

One of the breakthroughs of the republic was the idea of people being equal under the law. In 449 B.C., government leaders carved some of Rome's most important laws into 12 tablets. The Twelve Tables, as they came to be known, were the first Roman laws put in writing. Although the laws were harsh by today's standards, they gave every citizen equal treatment under the law.

An example of a law from the Twelve Tables was that females were to have guardians even after they became adults. Another law said it was permitted to gather fruit falling down on another man's farm. A harsh measure said if someone had written or sung a song that insulted someone else, he should be clubbed to death.

Roman law took a unique approach to people in its conquered lands. Rather than rule those people as subjects, the Romans invited them to become citizens. These people then became a part of Rome, rather than enemies fighting it. The new citizens received the same legal rights as everyone else.

The Punic Wars

The early republic often found itself at war with its neighbors. When the Romans were fighting the Carthaginians, Rome was nearly conquered. The people of Carthage were a trading civilization whose interests began to conflict with those of the Romans. Carthage is a city in what is today Tunisia in northern Africa.

The two sides fought three wars, known as the Punic Wars, 264 to 146 B.C., over the control of trade in the western Mediterranean Sea. In the second war, Hannibal, a Carthaginian general, invaded Italy by leading an army, including elephants, across the Alps mountains. He defeated the Roman army, but was unable to sack the city of Rome itself. After occupying and attacking Italy for more than 10 years, Hannibal was defeated by the Roman general Scipio in 202 B.C.

By the Third Punic War, Rome was ready to end the Carthaginian threat for good. After a long siege of Carthage, the Romans burned the city to the ground. Carthage was finally defeated, and the republic was safe.